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The Pedagogy of Riffing: Cultivating Meta-Awareness and Citizenship through Metacommentary



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Abstract: This article proposes a “pedagogy of riffing” and examines how satire and some earlier forms of metacommentary can help first-year composition students appreciate the mediated nature of contemporary current-events discourse. Beginning with comic news and working back to those pioneers of cultural riffing, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, this article examines the nexus of rhetorical awareness, citizenship, and riffing. I argue that using forms of metacommentary, situated within a pedagogy of riffing, helps students to locate themselves in the larger discussion of politics and informed citizenship.

After announcing his retirement on February 10, 2015, Jon Stewart, host of the tremendously popular *The Daily Show*, triggered a rash of reflections on the role his show has played in the American imagination. Most of these lamented the loss of this pointed satirist whose critiques of media and politics positioned him as a “trusted” news source. As a professor of composition, I have come to appreciate not only how important and useful he and other popular satirists have become for students, but also how, for teachers, satire can create connections between critical thinking and the habits of mind that contribute to students’ transferable skills as writers and citizens. In this article, I will show how *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and other forms of satirical metacommentary can enable what I call a “pedagogy of riffing” that helps students become meta-aware of their positions within the competing narratives around them. This consciousness of one’s own position, a meta-awareness, begins with the textual but can transfer to the political.

I find the concept of riffing useful because it suggests what we hope to accomplish with much critical thinking and intellectual observation. The term riffing (which derives from the musical slang for repeated chord progressions within a work) externalizes ideas about an event that might seem whimsical but ultimately relate to a core theme, suggesting an awareness of situatedness within the culture and audience. A riff picks up on the themes of the original text or “through-line.” A worthwhile distinction here, one which sheds some light on the practice of riffing, is how it is distinguished from heckling. Whereas the latter tries to “destroy the text” by “fault finding,” the former offers an alternative that “settles over an existing text, creating a new thing, dependent on the previous work, but greater than it” (McWilliams and Richardson 113). Paying attention to the riffer’s improvisation (such as Jon Stewart’s metacommentary on contemporary politics) puts the students in the position of being hyper-vigilant readers. Students’ prior knowledge, particularly their sophisticated, if unexamined, comfort with riffing (as a form of metacommentary) allows for critical and rhetorical reflection, which then encourages understanding of a mediated political world. In addition, a pedagogy of riffing necessitates rhetorical awareness of form, diction, audience and tone, an awareness that helps lead students towards their own ability to reflect on and control ways of thinking.

There are a number of reasons why I find satire, in particular, to be a useful approach within a pedagogy of riffing—foremost among them that it “requires an audience to maintain multiple representations of the text” (qtd. in Duffy and Page 548). Satire’s mockery and parody call attention to both its subject and itself, asking the viewers/readers to distinguish between the two and shake off their own complacency. Its utility in encouraging critical thinking and reflection is found partially in these inherent features of the genre. But it also asks its audience to notice “the irony that is at the heart of its humor” (Colletta 860); thus, they must also be aware of what is being mocked in its original form and the layering of the satiric voice.

One issue that underpins satire’s work is the rhetorical awareness required to participate in this transaction. In

other words, the student needs to understand the audience/writer/text dynamic, and the satirist needs to be able to predict responses. When first-year writing students begin to sort through the inner (and outer) workings of satire, its mechanics and politics, they enter a space of necessary pausing, reassessing, and reflection. With the appropriate prompting, they come to see their role as an audience. Potentially they become aware of both their own “metacognitive knowledge” (an understanding of what they do and don’t already know about the subjects) as well as their “metacognitive regulation” (adjusting one’s own approach to learning) (Flavel, Sitko). These exercises in working with satire, and the concomitant metacognition it demands, also provide students with a sort of preparation for informed citizenship. As they (and their writing) move into the public square, an early step is learning to navigate the deliberation and actions of civic discourse. By engaging with satire, students begin to appreciate how multi-layered one’s own engagement with the world-at-large can be.

The metacommentary associated with satire is ultimately a means of taking back the text, and it manifests itself in riffing. Since Jon Stewart’s comedic riffing is, or was, a great favorite of college students, it’s fortunate that his analysis (even with his biases) of the media and current events lends itself to an appreciation of mediated texts. His carefully recreated newsroom, persona, and rhetorical positioning “[act] as a comedically critical filter through which to process the suspect real world of reportage and debate. Both the mimetic and the real are equally important components of the show” (Day 85). Teasing apart the actual from the parodic and identifying the multiplicity of voices in comic news pushes students to a self-aware, critical stance that one can detect in their writing. For today’s students, satiric news is frequently their first engagement with the textual-political dynamic—what Amy Wan has called the relationship between citizenship and writing.

In her 2011 article, Wan effectively traces the “uncontroversial” status of the “citizen writer” within the framework of composition studies. In it she argues for cultivating and questioning the “habits of citizenship” and “[acknowledging] the limitations of what citizenship can do for students,” explaining that “we should create a space where our own citizen-making through the teaching of literacy is a more deliberate activity, [enlivened] by connecting classroom practices to other instances of citizenship in production” (46). A corollary to this charge is how we enter the larger discussion of politics. For my students, it becomes crucial to cultivate a mindfulness of the “filters” through which we come to information—that is, its very mediated nature. The mediation within satiric news shows “allows us...to briefly hold the [commentator’s] interpretation of the ‘text’ as the final (often satirical) say”; however, as Zachary Grimm argues, our real work is to “distance ourselves mentally from the humorous perception, ideally recognizing it as humorous, which allows us to laugh, because we’re not then taking it as the intended serious interpretation” (Grimm 137). When our class collaboratively produces responses to satiric news and riffing, we model practical exercises in democratic citizenship. Focusing on the task of consensus building, we begin to answer Wan’s call to attend to “habits of citizenship” that can ideally transcend the classroom. Because satiric news insists on the viewers’ attention to issues of civic involvement, using this as a text connects classroom practice explicitly to the real world.

Satire can be tricky. In discussing the film *Borat*, Beth Bonnsetter explains that if students miss the ameliorative or derisive aim of Sacha Baron Cohen’s satire, they risk a troubling misunderstanding of the work. Their mistake “can at best result in non-action, a reinforcement of the social problems as individual faults rather than systemic ones” (18). Kenneth Burke’s parsing of satire is extremely useful in this regard. He explains that how we approach and define situations (as friendly or unfriendly) determines our relation and reaction to them and ultimately our ability to affect them. These frames form “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking [human] gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (Burke 5). Within his ensuing poetics, he posits both “frames of acceptance” and “frames of rejection.”

In his 2009 article, “A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction,” Don Waisanen also casts Stewart and Colbert in the framework of Burke. He argues they

are models for the way in which playfulness can create space for civil political engagement. They teach their audiences to identify the logomachies of contemporary politics and media, which are always lurking in the symbolic nature of human affairs. As such, there is rhetorical and humanistic value in their practices. We might reasonably surmise that Stewart and Colbert would agree with Burke’s (1955) advice that criticism is best when the world is approached with a kind of “smiling hypochondriasis.” (Waisanen 273)

The hyper-awareness, even paranoia about the world, suggests a sensitivity we seek to cultivate in a critical and *reflective* thinker. In addition, a certain amount of ‘distancing’ is desirable—a sensitivity to the agendas in the news and its presenters is necessary for an engaged citizenry. There is already significant research documenting how, or if, satiric news shows participate in the work of informing the electorate.^{[\[1\]](#)} Whether or not it fosters civic engagement (and I will return to that point in the conclusion), the satiric approach is the lens through which many students now enter social and political conversations.

I find this connection between civic engagement and satire useful. I teach a course on critical thinking and writing that is linked to both a political science and a history class. In election years, such as 2008 and 2012, the course concentrates on the whole electoral process, as it will again in 2016.^[2] Over the past few years in particular, I have been struck by how many students had their first contact with the election through a form of satirical media. An early example of this occurred when comedian Stephen Colbert (at the time the host of *The Colbert Report*) ran a parody of Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty's campaign trial balloon (The Courage to Stand) that mocked, word for word and image for image, the clichés of that campaign ad.

The Pawlenty video, "leaked" on YouTube to test his potential candidacy, cast him as a heroic, brave, and altogether iconic savior of America and our way of life. Pawlenty does not overtly declare his candidacy, but he comes extremely close, and it's difficult to understand a rhetorical context in which he's not at least positioning himself on the national stage. Thematically, he appeals to Americans' traditional perception of themselves as pragmatists who overcome challenges. Pawlenty's video, and Colbert's scene-for-scene parody, present us with a sort of pedagogical gift, but I probably never would have seen this video if it were not for my students, and they, in turn, would not have seen it had it not been for the parody. This raises one of the critical, and promising, aspects in teaching satire to students; in today's world of comedic news, students are likely to know the satire before the original. Thus, the challenge of teaching satire should acknowledge the degree to which students may have already engaged in a certain amount of reflective work. The comedic frame relies on a reflection that students are engaged in, whether or not they are conscious of it.

In the original clip Governor Tim Pawlenty begins by constructing a list of antecedent-consequence relationships: "If prosperity were easy, everybody around the world would be prosperous. If freedom were easy, everybody around the world would be free. If security were easy, everybody around the world would be secure. They are not. None of this is gonna be easy, but this is the United States of America" (Pawlenty). Its inherent fallacy, the overgeneralization of a complex set of confounding variables, and the patronizing stance belie his authoritative tone. Even without the Colbert satire, the Pawlenty piece is useful for discussions of political rhetoric and would be a great piece to use in a classroom. In Steven Colbert's revision, he sets *himself* up for a run at the election. Colbert's version satirizes almost every trope the Pawlenty camp throws into the clip. The extremes of mockery that Colbert resorts to make it easier to see the nature of what he is criticizing. Colbert's filtering of Pawlenty provides a sort of shortcut to critical thinking. In fact, the whole piece closely mirrors a version of a writing exercise I assign.

Twisting the traditional practice of metaphrases, I have students take a satiric text and rewrite it in its literal meaning, stripped of satiric embellishments. In analyzing the Pawlenty "text," half of the students' work was done for them. The questions I would ask about rhetorical positioning were already identified and sent up by Colbert and his writers. For example, how does Colbert juxtapose the original venue for the speech (the sedate National Press Club) with the elaborate, ersatz-epic backdrop of the released version? In what other ways does he capitalize on the hyperbolic imagery and tone? Colbert's lexical and visual riffing reveals a substantive critique. His team guides us toward analysis through what Robert Reich calls "symbolic-analytic work"—processing the information and symbols deployed (Reich 175). Students can unpack the work performed by Colbert's phrase "weapons of mass introduction."

When we begin this early assignment on metaphrases, my aim is to sensitize students to the role diction and tone play in satire and authorial position in general. I have them research the term metaphrases on the OED online as well as with a number of resources I place on reserve including the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. They generally come back to class with variations of the term "translation," which we then further research together in class. We briefly discuss Walter Benjamin's argument that the relationship among languages is integral to producing a meaningful translation, and how this works in choosing words. While we certainly cannot, even with web assistance, address his call to consider "pure language," or all languages, we can play with word choice, connotations, and the dynamic among words in phrases in the construction of tone.

We then examine a satiric text; I have used classical ones, like Jonathan Swift, but increasingly I have employed the comic newspaper *The Onion*. This works well because the headlines capture the spirit of the articles (the former are notoriously better than the latter). Working in small groups, students offer three or four versions of the headlines (and eventually an explanatory paragraph) that strip the satiric and attempt to lay bare what is being parodied. This is more difficult than it appears, and they frequently must resort to a paragraph to replace a sentence. In other words, they need to be acutely aware of intent and language. For example, a May 2008 *Onion* headline reads: Obama, Clinton, McCain Join Forces to Form Nightmare Ticket (Vol. 44 Issue 21). The satire here is obvious on some level but requires an understanding of how the candidates are being presented by the media, their respective platforms, and the public's mood.

The response written by one of my groups is typical: "Several, natural competitors, are running together as one candidate, combining all the issues that annoy voters in one super candidate." As they progress, they trace how the choice of candidates, the diction ("Join Forces," "Nightmare"), and the grammar reflect the intent of the article. When they're more comfortable appreciating how language works in satire, we collectively address two or three clips from a comedy news source. The website for *The Colbert Report* still supports a large archive of clips, which are an ideal length for this exercise. Moving to the longer visual texts, the students can supplement the rhetorical moves they identify with facial expressions, cuts, superimposed images, and graphics. And the process can continue; I look forward to having students compare Stephen Colbert's older reactionary character to his newer incarnation as a more straightforward comedic commentator. This, too, will offer opportunities for "translation." In any event, what happens to the viewer, let alone the student, in this dynamic is a fascinating study of the interaction between mediated experience and critical thinking.

Students already come to this material from a critical perspective. It is therefore easier to get them to identify moments of riffing. I have them do so in various texts and by creating their own variations on a theme through abbreviated blog responses (microblogs) with a limited number of student responders. They quickly realize that their comfort working in this form originates in their real-world immersion. In other words, the utility of this term is that students do not need to be taught to riff as much as merely given the name to a practice they're already engaging in. As digital natives, they already are expert rifiers. Students are thus, unaware though they may be, practitioners not only of metacommentary but also a form of metacognition, that is, "thinking about thinking." They need only to be shown how much of what they do in their lives outside of the classroom involves riffing and metacognition. Their social networks survive on "re-tweets," reactions, and immediate reflection—Facebook even asks, "what is on your mind?"

Raffella Negretti in her 2012 article on metacognition, task perception, and performance explores how "metacognition helps inexperienced writers acquire the ability to understand and apply the rhetorical characteristics of academic written communication" (147). Her findings suggest that when the students reflect on their approaches regularly, especially while writing, their awareness develops and can translate into intentional writing decisions, fostering transfer (170,160). While transfer, especially high-road transfer, remains a challenge for composition professors and an area of research for scholars, the importance of awareness in this process has significant support. The very nature of political satire, riffing, and working through textual frames enhances the need to pause and consider the moves both of the author and any response the student makes.

Once students realize how immersed they are in the world of satire and riffing, this comfort level can ease them into a conversation about rhetorical awareness and positioning. As they come to apply some of these strategies themselves, they often begin to question their own understanding of operation/mechanisms. This liminal status, that is, in the no-man's land between familiarity and expertise, can be quite valuable, complementing research on transfer traced and expanded upon by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi in *Tracing Discursive Resources: How Students Use Prior Knowledge to Negotiate New Writing Contexts in First-Year Composition*. The authors argue for the advantages of having students achieve a "productive balance between expert and novice status" in order to move toward effective academic writing (314). The work on both satiric news and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* engages in this very type of flux, having students recognize, define, and then manipulate riffing and satire. Leading students to understand how their prior knowledge can be disassembled and reused seems key to encouraging transfer. Again, as social media natives, my students have prior knowledge that can be "repurposed."

Over the past several years, I have attempted to plumb the possibilities of this culture of riffing. In particular, I hope to sensitize students' to their position in this dynamic and the frequently dialogic nature of knowledge. At my institution, a large, private liberal arts university, our First Year Connections Program links three courses from different disciplines focused around a common theme. My "cluster" offers political science, history, and writing composition. One of the elegant ways that these classes fit together is that politics often is rhetoric.

In part to avoid the variable of overt political engagement and to reveal the work of metacommentary and filters, I turn with my students to a period before the audience was so definitely involved in a practical conversation. I start explorations of citizenship and screens with the metacommentary of the TV show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Begun in 1988, the show was originally supposed to fill two hours on the lowest rated television station in Minneapolis. Its format, as it evolved, positions three silhouetted characters in front of a movie screen. Throughout the movies ("the worst [they] can find"), the characters provide a running commentary that, while very funny, is surprisingly allusive and critical. The show, called "MST3K" by its fans, soon attracted a huge following among the college population in the Twin Cities, and later, through cable syndication, nationwide.

So much of what happens in contemporary pop-culture satire (from *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* to the endless "World's Dumbest" and "World's Funniest" variety of pseudo-reality shows) relies on the sort of riffing that, in the late 1980s, was still new. *MST3K*, along with VH1's cynically self-referential *Pop-Up Videos*, was a pioneer

in a cultural shift. As mentioned above, college students today have grown up in a culture that takes this riffing for granted. But most of them are not familiar with *MST3K* (new episodes of the show ceased in 1999—coincidentally, at almost the precise moment *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* began, and in another coincidence, shortly after Stewart retired, the show's creators announced its return). I have found that going back to this earlier form of textual commentary gives the students a means of recognizing both the structure and the tradition of riffing.

In *MST3K*, the silhouettes of Mike and the two robots he creates for companionship offer scathing commentary on the film's acting, over-acting, directing, writing, and social suppositions. The garden variety bad features, often schlock horror or monster movies, are sometimes preceded by carefully selected "shorts"—just as they might have been in the movie theaters of an earlier era. The one I show is a ten-minute mental hygiene (or social guidance) film from 1950 called *A Date with Your Family*. This short exemplifies how the myth of the ideal family of the 1950s was overtly propagated even during that period. Ken Smith, author of *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970*, quotes film archivist Rick Prelinger describing it as "suburban horror story... so contrived, so controlled and limiting, that it is hard to imagine living, breathing, thinking people [produced] it" (Smith 135). It clearly illustrates an impossible "ideal" of family dynamics, configuration, and aesthetics. Ultimately it filters and heavily guides its presentation of the 1950s. The narrator, none other than Hugh Beaumont, later the father on the TV show *Leave It to Beaver*, already embodies the "perfect" father. He becomes one of several tour guides to this time period (the first being the movie without his voice-over). The prescriptive message of this short is that we should all emulate the characters shown on the screen. These films' reactionary ideals are, in their way, a response to the chaos and violence of World War Two. As Smith argues, they exemplify the "post war belief that happiness could only be attained through group bonding" (36).

In leading the students up to their viewing of *MST3K*'s version of the short, I offer them an experience (over the course of several classes) of pulling aside the veils in any textual analysis. I remind them of the knowledge they already bring into play. We begin with an informal discussion of what images and ideas they have of the American Dream. Generally we brainstorm together, collecting our ideas on a Google Doc. In almost all cases we come, quickly, to some version of the white picket fence and 2.5 children. Drawing on popular culture, students offer examples from movies like *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *The Great Gatsby*, and, maybe, if we're lucky, *Citizen Kane*. As we refine what constitutes the dream (self-sufficiency, economic success, and hard work) someone usually mentions *Scarface*. This is always a great moment, because we can drill down to the role ethics plays in the dream and, ultimately, to what degree this dream is realistic. For example, isn't Tony Montana's path to economic success the one most available to him? Do the ends justify the means? Isn't this just the American Dream by another name? And does his violent end subvert the story or suggest that no one who takes this path can succeed? By complicating our initial experience of the American Dream, we see the accretion of assumptions and directive mythology. By the time the document (which comes to resemble something of a wiki) is "finished," there is an abundance of examples offering traditional and reimagined versions of the dream.

Building on this, we turn to focus on one of the more mythologized decades, the 1950s. I provide them with a reading from Stephanie Coontz's examination of 1950s nostalgia, *What We Really Miss about the 1950's*. The very concept of nostalgia leads us to a productive discussion of the veil it draws between the experience itself and our perception of it. Coontz discusses how popular culture idealized the 1950s with television shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and debunks the mythology of the perfect family, explaining that these shows elide issues of race and gender discrimination, economic realities, and social tensions in general. Students blog their responses to this essay in low-stakes reaction posts. Quite a few are struck by the "dryness" of this writing, but they effectively cull facts and notice the clear juxtaposition between the fiction and the reality of the decade. Although they may disagree with certain claims Coontz makes, her argument makes sense to them.

When we finally turn to *A Date with Your Family*, we watch the original short once through with very little set up. Students are always uneasy about how to react to the movie. The laughter might start gradually as they recognize how heavy handed much of the script is. Some think it's a parody right at the start, disbelieving that this could possibly be serious. But some recognize the schema that Coontz had set up as aspirational values (the domestic women, the sporty, working, strong men) and recognize this as a potentially straightforward advice manual. After we discuss their responses to the movie, I show them excerpts from Ken Smith's *Mental Hygiene* and examine his argument that these shorts "sold citizenship in the icy depths of the Cold War, noninvolvement during the McCarthy era, and the cozy comfort of the status quo in the Eisenhower years" (23). Smith's claims strike some as unlikely, but others remember versions of the Health Class Movie, often quite dated, introducing them to sex. It then fits into their own experience, and we get some traction from their ability to diagnose the messages they were sent about appropriate and responsible behavior.

When *MST3K* satirizes *A Date with Your Family*, nearly fifty years later, it uses ironic commentary to expose the impossibility of achieving this "dream" date with your family. While Hugh Beaumont advises the audience to avoid

all conversation that is not salubrious to digestion, an *MST3K* character will talk over or after him, revealing the hypocrisy or absurdity of the short's instruction. The original *A Date with Your Family* film, by omission, stresses the importance of family harmony and racial invisibility. The white, middle class, nuclear family with a working father, a homemaking mother, a baseball-playing older son, and a table-setting/flower-arranging middle daughter is charged with "not springing unpleasant surprises on dad." Because he's had a "hard day at the office," they're to greet him, "as though genuinely glad to see him." *MST3K* narrator Mike calls attention to this stilted, pedantic advice: "they're not (glad) of course." Dinner-time conversation, Hugh Beaumont tells us, should entail "[conversing] pleasantly. I said pleasantly for that is the keynote at dinner time ... pleasant, unemotional conversation helps digestion." *MST3K*'s Mike retorts, "Emotions are for ethnic people." Later the metacommentators offer this jab at the sanitized, unrealistic portrait of the daughter, condensing and enacting the horror of violating the monitored mores by mimicking her voice and scandalously announcing: "Dad, I'm dating a Negro." Throughout, they comment on the overly determined and scripted interaction among the family's "date night" participants, while also doing their own work on American family mythology. Perhaps the *MST3K* version suggests a newer more modern and appealing "myth" about what we should endorse in the American family—progressive values regarding gender, race, and social equity.

Clearly, these social and lexical projectiles penetrate the facile, idealized, and nightmarish vision of family proffered by the movie. But what, other than a visual, analyzable text, does this meta-film offer students of composition? One of my student's responses pointed the way. Writing about the filters through which the viewer comes to the simulacrum of a 1950s family, my student wrote:

Even though the short does not make the narrator out to be a family member, *Mystery Science Theater* shows that in reality, he is. The narrator is telling the families of the 1950's proper etiquette ("... napkins on the right ...") and how to act like a happy, American family. But, with the explanation comes the insinuation that every family needs a narrator. What other way is there that would show how to have a proper family meal? *A Date with Your Family* was a means to eliminate all other answers to that question." ("Mark" author of student paper).

"Every family needs a narrator." I paused when I first read this. Its simple construction and precise meaning impressed me. More than that, it indicated a prescient awareness of the dynamic between writer and audience. The original short communicated this need for a narrator (for the family and for the viewers), and *MST3K* exposed how prescriptive this message was. Both Beaumont and *MST3K* must assess their audiences' expectations and very consciously provide a frame by which to guide their viewers' experience: the former to encourage adherence to the status quo and the latter to see the ludicrousness of accepting that lesson.

Satire requires a sophisticated understanding of audience—one of the crucial components in building rhetorical awareness. It can "encourage a more complex view of how language choices relate to audience identification and persuasion" (Seitz 372). Thus, when we turn to focus on the satire in *MST3K*'s version of *A Date with Your Family* it only makes sense that we consider audience—an idea that my students are both ambiently and explicitly made aware of in early discussions of the Aristotelian pyramid. Imagining an audience, of course, has its own tradition in composition theory and one this assignment reflects. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's 1984 article *Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked* and their 1996 reexamination *Representing Audience* suggest important tensions in the larger conversation (*Addressed* 165). In negotiating the distinction they trace between "audience addressed" (establishing the importance of assessing and responding to an actual audience) and "audience invoked" (arguing for the fictional complicity of an imagined audience and the readers' ability to occupy that role), Ede and Lunsford recommend a synthesis of these views, one which asks the writer to act as reader, creating a role for the reader as s/he writes and acknowledges the expectations of audience with "analysis of precise, concrete situations" (168). In 2009, Lunsford and Ede revisit these themes and bring in the complexities that arise with digital media, specifically how authorship and audience are open to everyone in the electronic age and how the collaborative possibilities of the web challenge fundamental assumptions of ownership and authorship (*Among the Audience*).

As students parse levels of audience and assess the viewers for both the original and *MST3K*'s version of *A Date with Your Family* they may, as Reiff argues, perhaps [become] more aware of how "the process of meaning construction is truly a social negotiation, as well as a potentially conflictual negotiation" (419). As they watch *MST3K*'s version, students create a document divided into audiences with each one having a sub-column titled "implications": "Original," "*MST3K*," "Academic/Us." Under each of these columns they record paraphrased lines and moments that seem directed at a particular audience. Arrows then suggest which ones might bleed over to other audiences and how *MST3K* used earlier lines to suggest alternate readings. For example, in her column under "Original," my student Nicole records, "the two boys get washed up for dinner." The implication, she notes, is that "there is a correct hygiene and appearance for family time." When she watches with the *MST3K* overlay, she quotes the line, "Brother runs a boy-washing service on the side," remarking that the "Implication" has a

homoerotic tone, “maybe making the original characters seem like they’re not what they seem and maybe the ‘boy cleaning service’ is like a lemonade stand (capitalism criticism?). Something as normal as washing before dinner seems alien and even disturbing.” This gives her the opportunity to craft a paper topic tracing the manipulations of how the texts address subjects of sexuality or economics within the framework of audience expectation. What is *MST3K* mocking? How do they identify their own audience’s sympathies with regard to these subjects?

What *MST3K* does is a fine example of the distinction I drew earlier between riffing and heckling. Rather than seeking to destroy it, the riffing on the original film directs the audience towards the “correct” reading of *A Date with Your Family*. Metacommentary, in general, provides a means of differentiating between the stated intentions of the text and how it actually works on the audience. By explicitly describing how *MST3K* riffs on moments in the film, like the “boy-cleaning service,” students reveal the agenda of the commentary as well as what the commentators argue was the agenda of the original.

Exposing the students to these multiple intentions and their own role as audiences in grappling with them can, as David Seitz argues, “free” their voices. They see the importance and possibility of distinguishing voices, intentions, and mediums. The political implications for students becomes clear when we look at the problems they might confront as informed citizens and active listeners. When they produce their own responses, as when they engage in the metaphrases exercise or the work I delineate below, their metacognitive experiences assist them in hearing and voicing their own agendas. As Seitz goes on to argue:

We cannot anticipate what the world will look like for our students’ futures Therefore students need to learn the ways to read the rhetoric of the situations they may face in the future. This approach then calls for a commitment to analyze critically multiple perspectives on an issue using multiple forms of writing and media. Also, when the students write in these multiple genres and parodic forms, they apply critical analysis without the more destructive agonistics of most academic writing and public discourse. (388)

The questions I pose to students when they turn to their own writing are geared toward having them reflect not only on the texts but also on their responses to them. They might unpack a comment or offer their own “better,” “funnier,” or more pointed riff on the original. They might even offer a riff on *MST3K* itself.

Students respond to these prompts in microblogs, participating in the confluence of voices presented by *MST3K*: the short, critical, and often barbed comments. Linked with face-to-face class discussions of rhetoric and the news shows, students appreciate the discourse community they occupy, and their writing reflects this comfort. Their microblogs (I’ve used both Twitter and short blogs on WordPress), read and commented on by two other students in the class, gave them a microcosm of the class community and linked my two sections as a larger reacting body. They produced their own writing and at times incorporated clips of the shows (and, in one memorable post, actually filmed and posted a two-minute riff on a Colbert segment). This viewing/discussion/production model proved enormously fruitful. Each aspect of it contributed to enriching their position as critical thinkers, creators of knowledge, and engaged citizens. It also brought in attentiveness to the media at play—the visual and written (both traditional and new)—and made them alert to the potential of riffs.

I intentionally implemented shorter microblogs rather than longer reflective writing. We used a traditional blog platform with limited followers. I did this, first, because this would begin their riffing (with feedback) on the text providing the base for their longer papers, and, second, because I wanted to exploit the possibility of the intensely focused/segmented response. Just as the *MST3K* short is compressed and the comic news is delivered in segments, their microblogs were condensed and accreted. The short microblog responses not only promote reflection on rhetorical awareness but also get them used to processing information in this form. After all, much of the critical information they will encounter in the world of politics will come in these sort of short, highly concentrated, and thoroughly mediated bits.

Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and *MST3K* all employ a sort of humor that engages in a relentless battle against media and cultural clichés. These satirists continually question how and what we come to know. The comedy originates in and leads directly to metacognition. Satire, of course, leads us even more directly to the tension between expectation and reality. Satire’s sense of “play” is never without an ameliorative component. As M.H. Abrams explains, satire “derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon” (Abrams 166). Quite frequently, satire elevates the speaker to an arbiter’s role: “Satire, as generally defined, is both a mode of discourse or a vision that asserts a polemical or critical outlook ... despite the aesthetic and often comic or witty pleasure associated with much satire, their authors incline towards self-promotion as judges of moral and manners, of behavior and thought. The franchise is theirs, they assume, to pass and execute verbal sentence on both individuals and types” (Preminger and Brogan 1114).

This very elevation of the author, however, can suggest a problematic component. Are we to privilege the viewpoint of the riffer? Does Mike of *MST3K* offer a “better” more insightful version of values? Certainly, he offers an aesthetic assessment of the film, but in so doing does his mediation detract from its pleasure? Do we need Mike and his robots to tell us how to read kitsch? Pauline Kael warned that academia might reinvest in these sort of “bad” films and, in so doing, detract from the “mindless pleasure” they provide. Jeffery Sconce raises a similar complaint in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics*, arguing that “the anthropological thrill of finding a jaw-droppingly implausible film on late night television has been channeled into... prepackaged irony” (2). And here, we must return to Burke’s formation of accepting and rejecting frames. If we locate most of these shows within the comedic frame (with occasional forays into the more distancing parody), we can understand that they “warn against the dangers of pride” and the perils of stupidity (Burke 41). They do not suggest that the commentator him/herself occupies an infallible position. Jon Stewart’s blustering, hyperbolic outrage; Stephen Colbert’s extreme, persnickety reactionary persona; Mike Nelson’s gee-whiz, wide-eyed innocence—these are all self-fashionings that underscore how flawed all of our perspectives might be.

This leaves us, finally, with the question of whether our pedagogical exercise, moving from satire to rhetorical awareness to riffing, is really creating “better citizens.” As Amy Wan argues, composition is generally assumed to be the preparation for literate citizenship. It is a basic assumption of higher education that a critical approach to texts *should* lead to a more critical approach to politics (and life). But when we watch Stewart or Colbert, the tension between heightened participation and reconfigured passivity is evident. Lisa Colletta asks, “Can the social and political satire of television shows such as *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*, and *The Simpsons* have any kind of efficacy beyond that of mere entertainment? Or does the smirky, self-referential irony that makes all of these shows so popular actually undermine social and political engagement, creating a disengaged viewer who prefers outsider irreverence to thoughtful satiric critique and ironic, passive democracy to discerning, engaged politics?” (859).

This question of social involvement or, at its most basic, the idea that the purpose of education is to contribute to the production of an informed citizenry therefore undergirds many discussions not just of satiric news but of pedagogy in general and writing in particular. Some scholars claim new media “enhances the public’s ability to become actors, rather than merely spectators, in the realm of media politics” (Davis and Owen 7). And yet, it’s impossible to escape the sense that this new media might not truly be “empowering.” We could easily turn back to Guy Debord’s idea that “passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity” (4). How active, really, is posting a comment anonymously? [\[3\]](#)

Ted Gioia is not optimistic either. Writing in *The Daily Beast* on The Death of Satire, he mourns the damage done by the murder of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists and bemoans the frivolity of satire today, with the best, like Colbert and Stewart, leaving their shows and even iconic political commentators like Tom Lehrer declaring satire “obsolete.” Yet the prevalence of various forms of satire, even in a more diluted state, has left students saturated and familiar with its techniques and nuances. My experiences teaching have largely confirmed that today’s students bring to my classes a significantly more sophisticated knowledge of satire. This is directly useful for reminding students that their prior knowledge can be used to address current academic situations and projects and the larger world of politics.

I find compelling reasons to be optimistic about the usefulness of these approaches in helping to create responsible citizens. Presenting unexpected texts as instances of riffing can help students reframe their understanding of argumentation and participation. Satiric or straightforward riffing can also, as Waisanen explains, “demystify public discourses” (128). When we look at contemporary political texts as direct responses to preexisting arguments, it sensitizes students to language and tone. Although the strategy of placing competing and sometimes adversarial pieces side by side (in order to understand the dynamic between them) is not new, riffing can take this in new directions. What riffing suggests is that there might be a syncretic product in the interplay between the two.

Increasingly, political rhetoric itself focuses on responses, clarifications, and distortions. If students develop an ear for both dominant and disenfranchised voices, they are likely to leave the composition classroom with a heightened sensitivity to the multiple ways of citizenship. They might begin to see it as not just participation but as a more politically charged, complex act (Wan 39). My suspicion is that the pedagogy of riffing has applications outside the traditional composition classroom, and I can even imagine it being useful in preparing students to analyze and participate in discourses beyond the university. With a heightened awareness of competing voices and a facility for sifting through the arguments, students with a basic introduction to riffing might appreciate the nuances and moves of new communities. Given the changes that have taken place in media, even in just the past few years, students need strategies for hearing the quieter arguments that might otherwise be lost in the noise.

New media is all about multiple competing narratives. Andrew Sullivan explores this concept in his frequently anthologized essay “Why I Blog,” when he traces the evolution of the writer’s responsibility from answering to an

editor's revisions to the digital world's "insurrection from below" where "The feedback was instant, personal and brutal" (2). A writer in the digital world confronts his/her persona immediately, and not to acknowledge this is to look unformed. The self-awareness gestures towards a Brechtian removal of the fourth wall—a "bi-directional" discussion in which the "the audience as well as the text is engaged" (Havens 142).

Hyperlinks and immediate corrections have introduced new ways to moderate perception. The accretion of information—the minute-by-minute updates of, in Sullivan's case, the attacks of September 11, 2001—provides a re-livable experience and, as such, fosters self-examination as self-commentary. These changes circle back to Jürgen Habermas' claims about the public sphere and its attendant degradation.^[4] After all, when discussing media today, it's not so easy to argue that its functions are distinct from political powers; the media is increasingly aware of its participatory role. The public's ability to respond instantaneously to bloggers, reporters, and even politicians clearly calls for a reassessment of the "passivity" of the audience.^[5] Here, too, the highly mediated political narrative involves riffing: from a politician's initial message, a media representation, the pundits' comments, said politician's opponents' Twitter posts, and more. Since this is something our students have to contend with, giving them the opportunity to recognize and practice riffing and the mediation it affords its user is crucial to preparing an informed citizenry.

Comic news frequently assumes a connivance with its audience and yet often confronts the audience with its nonparticipation. New media has given comic news personalities the means to encourage audiences to act immediately through "agitprop comedy," as a recent article in *The Guardian* dubbed it. In the case in question, John Oliver encouraged his audience to write to the Federal Communications Commission, and in so doing crashed their website. *The Guardian* quotes Dannagal Young, a professor of political humor, as saying Oliver is "offering an explicit call to action that's unique ... He's interacting with a topic, not just commenting or issuing a broad judgment" (Helmore). This intersection of new and traditional media offers the composition instructor the possibility of working with students to reverse engineer arguments and mediums, as well as to read with a renewed and imperative sense of context. The tensions between passivity and action and between the visual and the written word all call for an ability to read and produce writing that registers this "multimediated nature of digital information" (Lanham qtd. in Lankshear and Knobel 22). Riffing models, and indeed it almost demands, participation from the observer. It might seem as if the viewer can passively watch the text unfold, but even the act of disentangling two narratives requires agency, so when Oliver riffs on his topic and calls for action from his viewers, he's making explicit the activity riffing suggests.

We have, only recently, moved from an era in which an informed citizen was one who read one or two news sources to one in which s/he can scan thousands. For us, the challenge is to go beyond the new electronic era's tendency to cursory examinations. Exercises in metacognition, of which riffing is my preferred one, help us to pause and reflect on the media, and they allow us to not only manage information but also enforce an awareness about our role in it. So, yes, I believe the considered study of satire and riffing actually does make better citizens. Just as a responsible citizen of the past had to be a critical reader of newspapers and observer of debates, so today's informed citizen has to master a variety of strategies for dealing with the democratization of information. Because riffing sensitizes students to competing arguments, it helps them to hear different voices and understand what they are hearing in the cacophony of voices. Because *MST3K* models audience participation, it also gives students the agency to riff—and the understanding that they have a voice as well. A good response, a good riff, requires reflection and awareness. Metacognition can help us reposition, that is, move us away from the temptation to respond immediately to the barrage that comes with digital communication.

But is *MST3K*, a relic from the dawn of the digital age, the best way to do this? I suppose aspects of the show seem outdated, and, yes, as suggested above, the ironic celebration of bad movies has its problems. But for me, these instances of pre-packaged commentary—of riffing—have become a crucial mechanism for encouraging my students to understand how political narrative functions. There is so much to be gained from the study of satire, and the ubiquity of comic news in new media makes this strategy not only desirable but nearly unavoidable. Just as importantly, exposure to the metacommentary of riffing helps students come to the realpolitik of current events with their lenses at the ready. And when we assume that television is outmoded as a technological tool in the classroom, we avoid the fact that it has, in fact, remained current. Presenting older programs within a nostalgic frame, such as *Nick at Night* did at its inception, shows its self-awareness and a savvy reading of its audience. Comic news coupled with the rhetorical work of *MST3K* provides composition students with a solid foundation for understanding their role within the maelstrom of mediated experiences.

Notes

1. See, among others, the work of Brewer and Marquadt. ([Return to text.](#))

2. At my institution, Hofstra University, our First Year Connections Program links three courses from different disciplines focused around a common theme. Together with faculty from political science and history, we designed a cluster that takes as its theme “democracy and politics.” Teaching the composition component, I have taken as my particular challenge revealing the rhetorical “stage” that is modern politics. ([Return to text.](#))
3. What constitutes “active” and “passive” participation is far from a settled issue in audience studies. I tend to agree with Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s early, and less inclusive, definition of active participation. ([Return to text.](#))
4. Jürgen Habermas’ work has been widely used by media studies scholars. Many see his argument, that a kind of commercial populist pressure led to a systematic “degradation” of political discourse, as very relevant to recent trends in media. ([Return to text.](#))
5. For more on this see the collection by Bennett and Entman. ([Return to text.](#))

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